

On July 26, 1948, with the stroke of a pen, President Harry Truman changed the course of American history. By signing Executive Order 9981, "Establishing the President's Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services," he officially declared "there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion or national origin." His action reflected the growing realization by more and more Americans that our Nation could no longer reconcile segregation with the values we had fought a war to uphold.

The United States had emerged from World War II with a new understanding of the importance of racial and ethnic diversity to our Nation's strength and unity. Nazi racism and the horrors of the concentration camps shocked Americans and revealed the true dangers of prejudice and discrimination. Hundreds of thousands of our fellow citizens from many different ethnic and racial backgrounds served and sacrificed in the war. The valor of segregated African American soldiers -- from the Tuskegee Airmen and the 761st Tank Battalion to individuals like General Benjamin O. Davis and General Daniel "Chappie" James -- could not be ignored. These heroes risked their lives for our country overseas, and yet still faced discrimination here at home. By signing Executive Order 9981, President Truman set America on the path to right this wrong.

We have come a long way in the subsequent 50 years, and the United States Armed Forces have been in the vanguard of our crusade to abolish discrimination in our society. Today our men and women in uniform represent so many aspects of the diversity that has made our Nation great, and they have proved that different people, sharing the same values, can work together as a mighty force for peace and freedom at home and around the world. We still have much to accomplish in our journey to become a society that respects our differences, celebrates our diversity, and unites around our shared values, but we should proudly mark the milestones on that journey and rejoice in the progress we have made thus far.

President Bill Clinton, July 26, 1998